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ABSTRACT

This report describes one of the largest and longest running school-based violence prevention programs in the country, the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), and discusses the results of a rigorous evaluation of the program's effectiveness conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at Columbia University's Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health. The report is designed to inform policymakers, program developers and managers at the local level, and other opinion leaders and decision makers of effective strategy for directly addressing the problem of violence among children and youth. Founded in 1985, the RCCP now serves approximately 9,000 students in 60 New York City public schools. The program is designed to promote constructive conflict resolution and positive inter-group relations. It is based on the philosophy that aggressive and violent behavior is learned and therefore can be reduced through education. The program is built around a set of core skills: communicating clearly and listening carefully, expressing feelings and dealing with anger, resolving conflicts, fostering cooperation, appreciating diversity, and countering bias. These skills are learned through a curriculum taught by teachers receiving both initial training and ongoing follow-up and support from RCCP staff developers. The RCCP is also implemented through the training of student-based peer mediation groups and school administrators, and by continued outreach to parents. Overall, NCCP's evaluation found that the RCCP had a significant positive impact when teachers taught a high number of lessons from the RCCP curriculum. Among other findings, children receiving a high number of lessons had significantly slower growth in self-reported hostile attributions, aggressive fantasies, and aggressive problem-solving strategies, as well as in teacher-reported aggressive behavior, compared to

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children receiving a low number of lessons or no lessons at all. (Appendices include related evaluations of the RCCP implementation, NCCP design for the evaluation of the RCCP, and implications of the RCCP evaluation for evaluation research.) (EV)

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RESEARCH BRIEF

Teaching Conflict Resolution

An Effective School-Based Approach to Violence Prevention

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The Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health
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National Center for Children in Poverty

1989–1999:
A Decade of Work
for Low-Income
Children and Families

National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) was established in 1989 at the School of Public Health, Columbia University, with core support from the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The Center's mission is to identify and promote strategies that reduce the number of young children living in poverty in the United States and that improve the life chances of the millions of children under age six who are growing up poor.

The Center:

- Alerts the public to demographic statistics about child poverty and to the scientific research on the serious impact of poverty on young children, their families, and their communities.
- Designs and conducts field-based studies to identify programs, policies, and practices that work best for young children and their families living in poverty.
- Disseminates information about early childhood care and education, child health, and family and community support to government officials, private organizations, and child advocates, and provides a state and local perspective on relevant national issues.
- Brings together public and private groups to assess the efficacy of current and potential strategies to lower the young child poverty rate and to improve the well-being of young children in poverty, their families, and their communities.
- Challenges policymakers and opinion leaders to help ameliorate the adverse consequences of poverty on young children.

Teaching Conflict Resolution:
An Effective School-Based Approach to Violence Prevention

by J. Lawrence Aber, Joshua L. Brown, and Christopher C. Henrich

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INTRODUCTION

A number of dramatic school shootings over the last two years have focused the attention of both the public and policymakers on the problem of youth violence. Yet, instances of school shootings are relatively rare, and youth violence, which reached an historic high in the early 1990s, has declined in the past several years.[1] Nonetheless, a substantial number of children in the United States— especially those growing up in urban areas—are exposed to high levels of youth violence.[2] As awareness of the problem of youth violence has increased, so have the calls for effective means of prevention.

The causes of youth violence are multifaceted, and our understanding of how these causes fit together remains incomplete. However, the factors that are known to put children at risk for becoming violent offenders are frequently in place before adolescence.[3] Therefore, interventions designed to prevent the development of risk factors for youth violence should begin early. Indeed, research has shown that such early interventions can have long-term effects on children's development into youth and adulthood and on the emergence of aggressive and delinquent behavior in particular.[4]

This research brief describes one of the largest and longest running school-based violence prevention programs in the country—the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)—and discusses the results of a rigorous evaluation of its effectiveness conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at Columbia University's Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health. The report is designed to inform federal, state, and local policymakers and opinion leaders, as well as program developers and managers at the local level, of an effective strategy for directly addressing the problem of violence among children and youth. The evaluation provides concrete evidence that early school-based violence prevention initiatives such as the RCCP can work and should be included in communities' efforts to prevent violence among children and youth.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The RCCP is a school-based primary prevention program that begins in kindergarten and extends through the 12th grade. The program is designed to promote constructive conflict resolution and positive intergroup relations. In doing so, it reduces early social-cognitive and behavioral risks for later aggression and violence. Founded in 1985, the RCCP is a collaboration between a community-based not-for-profit group, Educators for Social Responsibility Metropolitan Area (ESR Metro), and the New York City Board of Education, Division of Student Support Services. It is currently being implemented in over 60 New York City schools and replicated in 12 other school systems across the country by the RCCP National Center, an initiative of the national ESR.[5]

RCCP is based on the philosophy that aggressive and violent behavior is learned and therefore can be reduced through education. The specific objectives of the program are to:

- make children aware of the different choices they have for dealing with conflicts,
- help children develop skills for making those choices,
- encourage children's respect for their own cultural backgrounds and those of others,
- teach children how to identify and stand against prejudice, and
- make children aware of their role in creating a more peaceful world.[6]

These objectives are implemented primarily through a curriculum taught by teachers who receive both initial training and ongoing follow-up and support from the RCCP staff developers. The RCCP is also carried out through the training of student-based peer mediation groups and school administrators, and by continued outreach to parents. Through this multi-component approach, the RCCP aims to transform the cultures of classrooms and schools, thereby providing children with an environment containing similar opportunities for social-emotional learning as for traditional academic subjects.

The Curriculum

The RCCP curriculum is designed around several core skills—communicating clearly and listening carefully, expressing feelings and dealing with anger, resolving conflicts, fostering cooperation, appreciating diversity, and

RCCP aims to transform the cultures of classrooms and schools, thereby providing children with an environment containing similar opportunities for social-emotional learning as for traditional academic subjects.

countering bias. The lessons are organized into units based on these skills and each is designed to take from one-half to one hour, allowing for considerable teacher flexibility. Presented in 'workshop' format, the teacher's role in the lessons is not to impart knowledge, but rather to facilitate student-directed discussions and learning. This format has been shown to be an effective way to teach conflict resolution and inter-group relations.[7] Different versions of the curriculum have been developed for children in the lower and upper elementary school grades, as well as high school, enabling concepts to be conveyed to children at age-appropriate levels.

Teacher Training and Coaching

The RCCP staff developers coordinate a 25-hour introductory teacher training course and ongoing classroom follow-up and support, facilitate after-school meetings with other trained teachers in the school, and conduct advanced training sessions. During instruction, teachers learn about and practice the skills they will be teaching, effective techniques for conveying these skills to children, and ways to incorporate the concepts and skills into academic courses. The ongoing follow-up, as well as opportunities for advanced training enables teachers to review these core skills and provides support to them as they continue teaching RCCP lessons.

Peer Mediation

The peer mediation component of the RCCP gives children opportunities to use the conflict resolution skills they have learned. Children in grades 4-6 who are selected by either nominations from classmates, teacher suggestions, and/or an application process receive additional training in conflict mediation during a three-day session and then become identified as peer mediators who may intervene in conflicts during lunch and recess time. Mediators wear special tee shirts and work in pairs. When they see a conflict, they approach the involved students and offer their assistance in settling the conflict, but they do not intervene in physical fights. By selecting and training students in advanced conflict resolution skills, the peer mediation component of the RCCP encourages students to be actively involved in creating a peaceful school environment.

Changing the School Culture

In addition to training individual teachers and children, the RCCP aims to change the school culture. Toward that end, the RCCP also gives instruction to school administrators. The program is slowly introduced into a school over the course of several years. Initially, just a few highly motivated teachers per school are recruited. Over time, more teachers are added and more program components are implemented, such as peer mediation, until all of the program components are being used by the majority of teachers in a school. By "saturating" schools in such a manner, the culture and climate of the schools are changed and the RCCP has a greater impact on the students.

The RCCP also offers a parent training component entitled Peace in the Family. This module offers parent workshops in some schools. The RCCP staff typically conduct 10–12 hours of training per year for parents over the course of four workshops. These workshops cover the same topics taught to teachers, such as active listening to children, assertiveness and negotiation skills, plus an understanding of the developmental needs of children at different ages. This component is currently being implemented in approximately 15 schools per year.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Métis Associates and the Education Development Center previously conducted studies[8] based on interviews with teachers in the RCCP schools. These studies found that teachers are pleased with the RCCP and believe it positively affects their teaching and personal lives. Furthermore, teachers reported that the RCCP is effective at reducing aggression among their students. (See Appendix A for further details about these studies.)

The NCCP evaluation is the first study of the RCCP to: (1) investigate child development by direct assessment of children and (2) use comparison groups of children who did not participate in the program. It was conducted over the course of two years, beginning in the fall of the 1994–95 school year. In year one, the evaluation included approximately 5,000 children in grades 2–6 from 15 New York City elementary schools. Both the students and the schools were highly representative of the public education system in New York City.

The evaluation design was guided by an understanding that certain types of social-cognitive processes lead to the development of aggressive behavior and violence. These processes include children's beliefs and fantasies concerning aggression, their attributions about other people's behavior, and their interpersonal problem-solving skills. The evaluation was planned so that it could assess the impact of the RCCP on these social-cognitive processes as well as on aggressive behavior itself. (See Appendix B for further details about NCCP's evaluation design.)

The Findings

Among elementary school-age children, the social-cognitive processes that lead to aggression and the levels of aggressive behavior itself increase over time.[9] The results of this evaluation show that the RCCP can significantly reduce this rate of increase, in most cases, stopping it completely for the school year. This finding is consistent across child and teacher reports and for children's performance on objective measures of academic achievement. The specific results are outlined below.

The first important finding was that teachers varied greatly in their levels of RCCP implementation. For example, in year one of the evaluation, participating teachers taught between one and 55 lessons during the school year. Three distinct patterns of implementation were identified:

1) A *High Lessons* group comprised of teachers who taught many of the RCCP lessons (on average, 25 lessons over the school year), had received a moderate amount of training and coaching, and had a relatively low number of peer mediators in their classrooms;

2) A *Low Lessons* group comprised of teachers who taught few RCCP lessons but had received much training and coaching and had a relatively large number of peer mediators; and

3) A *No Lessons* group that did not teach any RCCP lessons and received no teacher training and coaching.

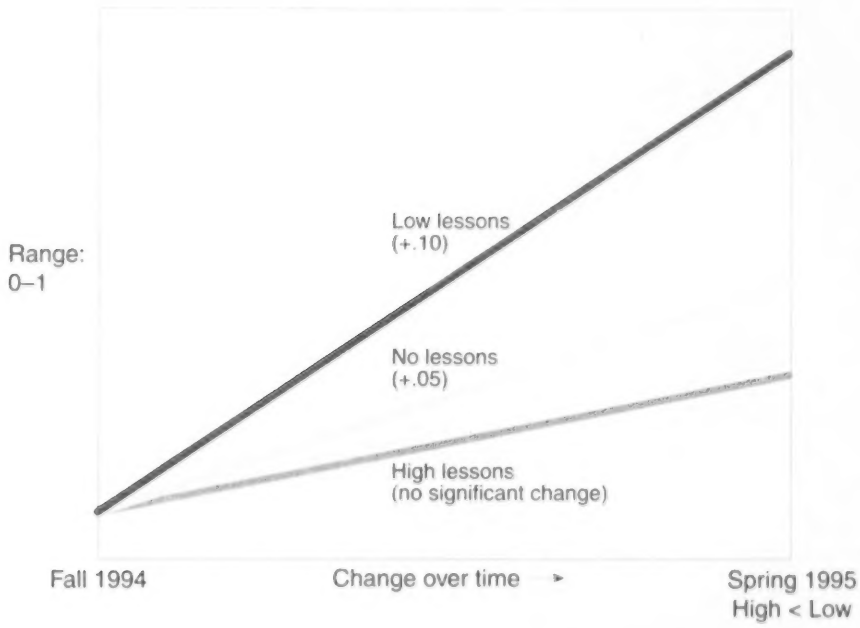
NCCP researchers compared children in these three groups on their rate of change in the targeted outcomes over the course of the 1994–95 school year. The results are presented here for child reports, teacher reports, and objective performance on measures of academic achievement.

Child Reports[10]

Analyses of data reported by children at the studied schools found:

- Increases in children's hostile attributions, aggressive fantasies, and aggressive problem-solving strategies were significantly reduced for the *High Lessons* group compared to the *Low Lessons* and the *No Lessons* groups. (See Figure 1.)
- Children in the *High Lessons* group were the only ones for whom competent problem-solving strategies did not decrease over the course of the year.

Figure 1
Children's hostile attributions

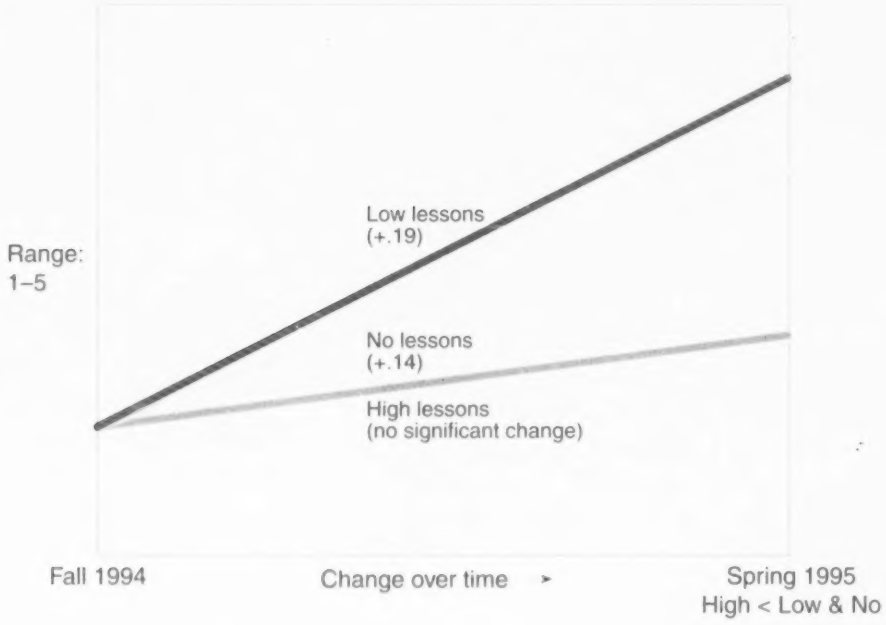


Teacher Reports[11]

Analyses of data reported by teachers about the behavior of each of the students in their classrooms found:

- Increases in children's aggressive behavior were significantly reduced for the *High Lessons* group compared to the *Low Lessons* and the *No Lessons* groups. (See Figure 2.)
- Children's pro-social behavior and emotion regulation significantly increased for the *High Lessons* group compared to the other two groups.

Figure 2
Teacher-reported aggressive behavior

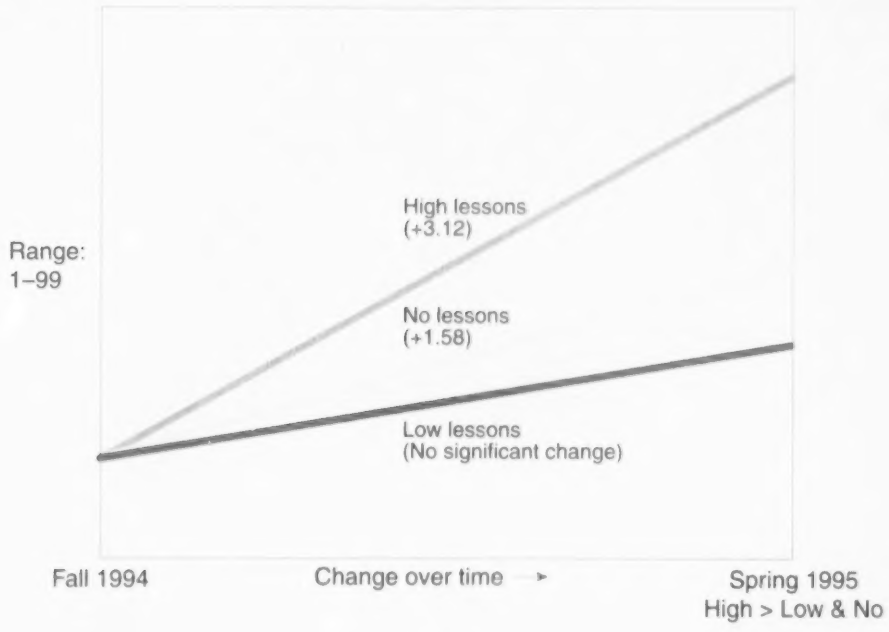


Measures of Academic Achievement[12]

Analyses of children's scholastic records obtained from the New York City Board of Education revealed:

- Children's reading and math scores on standardized achievement tests increased significantly for the *High Lessons* group compared to the *Low Lessons* and *No Lessons* groups. (See Figure 3.) This finding is not surprising and suggests that children can focus more on academics when there is less conflict with classmates.
- Children's grade, gender, and classroom and neighborhood context were also included in the analyses. The results indicate that the RCCP benefits all children regardless of gender, grade, or context, although the evidence suggests some slightly reduced benefits for boys, younger children, and children in high-risk classrooms and neighborhoods.
- Preliminary analyses have also been conducted to test the effects of the RCCP across both years of the evaluation. When each of the three RCCP implementation groups from the 1994–95 school year were combined with equivalent groups from the 1995–96 school year it was found that, for children in the *High Lessons* group across both years of the evaluation, increases in aggressive problem-solving strategies, aggressive fantasies, hostile attributions, and beliefs that aggression is "normal" continued to be significantly slowed compared to children in the other groups. The decline in competent problem-solving strategies also continued to be slowed. Furthermore, when amount of classroom instruction in the RCCP was looked at—controlling for the effects of the other RCCP components—the results showed that the amount of instruction in each of the school years

Figure 3
Children's academic achievement



was independently associated with slowed increases in children's hostile attributions and aggressive problem-solving strategies, and a decline in beliefs that aggression is normal. In short, each year of the RCCP has an additive effect on slowing rates of growth of many of the risk factors for aggression and violence.

These results supply compelling evidence for the effectiveness of the RCCP in impacting the developmental trajectories of children's social-cognitive processes and behaviors associated with later aggressive behavior and violence. These results are consistent across raters (children, teachers, and objective measures of academic performance) and apply to children whose teachers cover a large number of lessons from the RCCP curriculum and receive a moderate amount of training and coaching from the RCCP staff developers. Furthermore, it appears that two years of the program are better than just one. This finding highlights the importance of children's continued exposure to social-emotional learning.

Interestingly, the *Low Lessons* group did somewhat worse in the analyses compared to the *No Lessons* group. This unexpected finding suggests that teacher motivation and dedication may be critical for the effectiveness of the RCCP.

Findings from evaluations of similar violence prevention programs are consistent with the results of the RCCP evaluation. For example, a recent experimental evaluation of the FAST Track prevention model's PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) curriculum, which is similar to the RCCP curriculum but does not focus as explicitly on conflict resolution skills, has demonstrated that program's efficacy. Specifically, first-grade children in the intervention school had consistently and significantly lower levels of aggressive and disruptive problems than children in the comparison school.[13] Together, the findings from the experimental evaluation of FAST Track (which optimizes confidence that exposure to a curriculum is causing the observed effects) and the quasi-experimental evaluation of the RCCP (which optimizes confidence that similar findings would be obtained in other RCCP classrooms and schools) demonstrate the potential power of school-based early interventions for reducing aggression and preventing violence.

Program Cost

The effects of the RCCP at slowing the developmental trajectory of aggression are achieved at little financial expense. According to ESR Metro, the RCCP can be implemented for approximately $2,449 per teacher.[14] With 25 students per class, the cost translates into just $98 per child for the first year of program implementation. This price includes classroom instruction with the RCCP curriculum, teacher training, follow-up visits by the RCCP staff developers, and ongoing teacher support. The cost of RCCP is roughly equivalent to other similar school-based prevention programs.[15]

Implications for Program and Policy

The RCCP evaluation results to date have a number of implications for the successful implementation of violence prevention programs and for social policy pertaining to youth violence. (See Appendix C for the implications for evaluation research.)

Improving Program Design and Implementation

The effectiveness of the RCCP highlights the potential of school-based prevention programs that focus on the social-cognitive antecedents of aggression to reduce the growth of aggressive behavior and prevent violence. The RCCP evaluation shows that, by teaching children constructive social-cognitive strategies, violence prevention interventions can impact their subsequent behavior. Key findings are highlighted below.

- *Evaluation results demonstrate that it is imperative for teachers to be psychologically and behaviorally invested in new educational programs for the programs to be successful.* In the case of the RCCP, increased teacher training was ineffective and potentially detrimental if it was not translated behaviorally into actual teacher implementation of the RCCP lessons. The findings of the NCCP evaluation are consistent with the findings of the Education Development Center evaluation that some teachers may have felt coerced to participate by their principals. These teachers may have been more resistant to the fundamental principals of the RCCP.[16] This finding raises questions about teacher recruitment and professional development, namely how best to identify and cultivate intrinsic interest in conflict resolution education among teachers who are less likely to actively volunteer for the program. It also raises questions about the best strategy for allocating program resources. Possible ways to allocate resources include providing continued support and curriculum development for teachers who are already involved with the RCCP, providing initial training for teachers who express interest in the program, and exploring innovative techniques for recruiting potentially resistant teachers.
- *The RCCP was slightly more effective for older children.* This finding was also reflected in the Educational Development Center study where teachers expressed concerns that the lessons may be less developmentally appropriate for the younger grades. A number of fairly abstract concepts, such as peace, cooperation, and active listening, are core components of the RCCP model. The evaluation findings emphasize the need for concrete practices and innovative techniques for conveying these concepts to younger children. Toward that end, ESR has recently collaborated with early childhood educators on the development and publication of a curriculum to be used with pre-school-age children.[17]

- *The RCCP was designed as a primary prevention strategy for all children, but some children are at substantially higher risk for future aggressive and violent behavior than others and need particular attention.* To address this need, the RCCP piloted a new intervention component during the second year of the evaluation that focused on the specific needs of high-risk children. This intervention component included group and community service activities, intensive training in the RCCP concepts and skills, the pairing of high-risk children with children identified as positive peer leaders, and additional parental outreach. The goal of identifying and providing additional services to high-risk children is to improve the program's ability to facilitate positive change among the highest-risk children and thereby broaden the impact on school climate to more effectively prevent future violence. This program component is currently under investigation.

Changing Social Policy

Two important implications for social policy emerged from NCCP's evaluation of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program.

- *School-based prevention should be a central component of effective legislative efforts pertaining to youth violence.* Schools are the key institutions for the implementation of prevention programs because children spend the majority of their day at school, and the interactions they have with teachers and classmates greatly impact their social development. As states and communities consider how to deal with the problem of youth violence, it is important to inform policymakers that school-based violence prevention programs like the RCCP should be one key component of a strategy to prevent youth violence.

- *Teachers' quality of program implementation and support for program philosophy determine the effectiveness of school-based prevention programs.* Therefore, social-emotional learning must receive support at all levels within school districts, and its importance should be emphasized in both graduate and continuing teacher education. It is estimated that the U.S. will need to hire 2.2 million new teachers in the next decade because of increasing school enrollments and teacher retirements, along with legislation to reduce class size.[18] This burst of growth in the number of new teachers offers opportunities to train a new generation of educators in the importance of social-emotional learning to reduce aggression, to promote social competence, and to bolster student academic achievement.

CONCLUSION

School-based prevention programs like the RCCP can work and should be an integral component of communities' initiatives to prevent aggression and violence among children and youth. Through curricular instruction, peer mediation, and teacher training, the RCCP and similar programs teach children constructive strategies to negotiate conflict and promote inter-group understanding. The results of the NCCP evaluation show that, when implemented well, the RCCP is effective at slowing the rate of increase of social-cognitive processes and behaviors that lead to violence. Additionally, these effects are gained at a relatively low cost and are not purchased at the expense of academic achievement. On the contrary, high quality implementation of the RCCP appears to lead to more rapid increases in children's academic learning.

The goal of this report is to provide policymakers and program developers with the results of the NCCP's rigorous evaluation of this school-based violence prevention program in order to assist them in making informed decisions about the development and implementation of violence prevention efforts. Youth violence is a growing concern for many Americans, and approximately two out of three schools now use some form of ongoing violence prevention program.[19] It is important that school decisionmakers select and implement programs whose effectiveness is supported by rigorous independent evaluations such as the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program.

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APPENDIX A

Related Evaluations of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program Implementation

Prior to the evaluation of the RCCP by the National Center for Children in Poverty, Metis Associates surveyed 200 teachers and administrators in New York City RCCP schools.[20] They found that 71 percent of teachers reported decreased fighting since implementation, 66 percent reported decreases in verbal put-downs, 78 percent reported increased caring among children, and 72 percent reported improvements in children's abilities to take the point of view of others.

To further study the impact of the RCCP on children in a sample of 15 New York City public elementary schools, ESR Metro applied for grants from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the W. T. Grant Foundation. Subsequent grants were also received from the Pinkerton Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and the Kellogg Foundation. Two evaluations were conducted as part of this study. The Education Development Center (EDC) conducted a teacher perception study based on interviews with teachers. The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) conducted an evaluation of child outcomes.

The EDC's evaluation surveyed 32 teachers from a subset of eight schools representing different levels of the program's implementation. Research questions included: (1) how do the RCCP teachers implement the program, (2) how instrumental was the RCCP in bringing about any changes or improvements in children's behavior, and (3) what do teachers feel works well about the RCCP?[21]

Results indicated that teachers were generally pleased with the implementation of the RCCP. Most teachers perceived their training to be interesting, well-organized, and helpful. They also thought their RCCP staff developers were very helpful. Most teachers perceived the curriculum to be good, well-written, and flexible. Some teachers thought that the version of the curriculum for the older grades was more developmentally appropriate than the version for the younger grades. Teachers in schools with peer mediation thought it was a strong and important component of the RCCP. Additionally, teachers in schools where parents were involved perceived that parents were very pleased with the program. However, many teachers reported that parents were not involved at their school.

Furthermore, teachers reported that the RCCP had a positive impact on their teaching and personal lives, students' behavior, and school climate. Many reported internalizing the skills they were taught and using them in their personal lives as well as at school. In terms of impact on the children,

most teachers perceived that the RCCP resulted in less aggressive behavior and more peaceful conflict resolution in their classrooms, greater usage of RCCP vocabulary by children, and more focus by children on each other's feelings. Additionally, some teachers perceived a change in the overall school climate as a result of the program, especially when there were trained teachers, parents, and student mediators in the school building.

Additional analyses looked at the reasons for teacher involvement in the RCCP. Three distinct groups emerged. Teachers tended to be involved because either: (1) they were interested in conflict resolution, (2) they liked to participate in new educational programs, or (3) they were asked by their principal to participate. Teachers used the RCCP curriculum more when: (1) there was a high level of conflict in their classroom, (2) they perceived their students as having a particular need for the RCCP skills, and (3) they taught children in the higher grades.

In sum, both the Metis and the Education Development Center evaluations indicate that teachers are pleased with the implementation of the RCCP at their schools and perceive a positive impact of the program on child behavior. They also generated potential hypotheses about why some teachers are more involved in the RCCP than others.

APPENDIX B

NCCP Design for the Evaluation of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program

The NCCP evaluation was designed to ensure that its results would reflect the effectiveness of the RCCP as it is and has been implemented for the past decade in the New York City public schools. A quasi-experimental design was used in which comparisons were made between classrooms based on the extent to which teachers were involved with the RCCP and implemented its components (number of classroom lessons, amount of teacher training and coaching received from RCCP staff developers, and percentage of peer mediators in the classroom). Because of the nature of the RCCP teacher recruitment and implementation, random assignment of teachers was not possible. However, there was no systematic placement of children into classes based on level of RCCP implementation, so child assignment was, for all intents and purposes, random. Furthermore, the groups of children did not significantly differ on any of the pre-test measures, indicating that the groups were equivalent at baseline.

The design of this evaluation has both strengths and weaknesses. Strengths include the evaluation of the RCCP as implemented to scale in these 15 New York City public elementary schools. This increases the likelihood that the results obtained in this evaluation can be generalized to the RCCP's implementation in other schools. Because children's placement in classrooms was independent of teachers' participation in the RCCP, even though teachers were not randomly assigned to RCCP implementation groups, it is highly likely that children's exposure to RCCP implementation groups is causally related to their development over the course of the year.

Without randomly assigning teachers to RCCP implementation groups, the evaluation does not allow steadfast conclusions about whether the changes observed in children are due to the impact of the RCCP, other teacher-related characteristics (e.g., enthusiasm for teaching conflict resolution skills), or a combination of the two. Despite this weakness, it appears that the combination of having children receive lessons in the RCCP curriculum and being taught by teachers who are motivated and engaged in their work comprise the essential ingredients for maximum program effectiveness.

APPENDIX C

Implications of the RCCP Evaluation for Evaluation Research

Robust program evaluation combines qualitative and quantitative methods. NCCP's quantitative evaluation is complemented and informed by the findings of the Education Development Center's qualitative evaluation of the RCCP. These findings are highlighted below.

- *The quantitative study was able to empirically document the effects of different levels of program implementation by teachers, and the qualitative study was able to identify that teachers participated in the program for different reasons and that some felt obligated to participate due to the expectations of their principals.* Together these two findings are much more interpretable than either one alone.

- *With multi-modal programs, such as the RCCP, it is important to consider the interplay between various program components.* The current evaluation focused on the curriculum and the teacher training components of the RCCP. It also examined the peer mediation component of the program, but with inconclusive results to date. To assess the impact of the peer mediation component, it may be necessary to analyze differences between schools as well as between classrooms. Although curricular instruction may have the strongest impact on classroom behavior, components such as peer mediation and parental outreach may have a more diffuse impact on the overall school climate. This proposition is supported by the opinions of the teachers surveyed by the EDC.

- *It is important to look carefully at program components for effects pertaining to the amount of service delivery.* For example, in this evaluation, the group of teachers receiving the greatest amount of training did not effectively implement the program, and in some cases, their participation in the RCCP detrimentally affected their students. It is likely that resistant or ineffective teachers were targeted to receive more training with the intention of improving their effectiveness. This finding suggests that a more comprehensive means of assessing the effects of the amount (or dosage) of delivery for each component on program effectiveness is needed.

- *Generalizing the skills beyond the classroom to other activities and contexts is key for the success of school-based prevention programs.* Program effects would ideally generalize to other lessons within the classroom, other classes and activities at school, and the community served by the school. This evaluation is unique in that it takes into account the classroom, the school, and the community as different levels of influence on the children. Future analyses conducted as part of the RCCP evaluation will focus in more detail on the unique and combined effects of different levels of influence. This focus on school and community is critical for understanding the full extent of an intervention's effectiveness.

ENDNOTES

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3. See, for example, Coie, J. D. & Dodge, K. A. (1998). Aggression and antisocial behavior. In N. Eisenberg (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology, 5th Ed., Vol. 3: Social, emotional, and personality development*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

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5. The sites replicating RCCP are: Anchorage, AK; Atlanta, GA; Lawrence, NY; New Orleans, LA; Vista Unified Schools and Modesta City Schools, CA; Newark, West Orange, and South Orange-Maplewood, NJ School Districts; Lincoln County, OR; Roosevelt School District, AZ; and Boston, MA.

6. Ba, H. & Hawkins, J. (1996). *Resolving Conflict Creatively Program evaluation project*. New York, NY: Education Development Center, Inc.

7. Ray, P.; Alson, S.; Lantieri, L.; & Roderick, T. (1996). *Resolving conflict creatively: A teaching guide for grades kindergarten through six*. New York, NY: Educators for Social Responsibility Metropolitan Area.

8. See Metis Associates. (1990). *The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program: 1988–1989. Summary of significant findings*. New York, NY: Metis Associates and Ba & Hawkins in endnote 6.

9. Aber, J. L.; Jones; S. M.; Brown, J. L.; Chaudry, N.; & Samples, F. (1998). Resolving conflict creatively: Evaluating the developmental effects of a school-based violence prevention program in neighborhood and classroom context. *Development and Psychopathology*, 10(2), pp. 187–213.

10. These findings have been published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. See Aber, Jones, Brown, Chaudry, & Samples in endnote 9.

11. These findings have not yet been published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

12. These findings have not yet been published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

13. The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group. (In Press). Initial impact of the FAST Track prevention trial for conduct problems II. Classroom effects. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

14. This figure is based on an Educators for Social Responsibility estimate for training 25 teachers in 5 schools, which totals approximately $61,232. The cost includes all program expenditures, including teacher stipends and refreshments. Currently, school districts pay for 80 percent of this cost, with the remaining 20 percent covered by private foundations.

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20. Metis Associates also conducted an RCCP survey in the Atlanta, GA, public schools during the 1996–97 school year. The pattern of results is similar to those reported here. Please contact ESR for more information. See Metis Associates in endnote 8.

21. See Ba & Hawkins in endnote 6.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teaching Conflict Resolution

An Effective School-Based Approach to Violence Prevention

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PS 028119

NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN IN POVERTY
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Introduction

A number of dramatic school shootings over the last two years have focused the attention of both the public and policymakers on the problem of youth violence. Yet, instances of school shootings are relatively rare, and youth violence, which reached an historic high in the early 1990s, has declined in the past several years. Nonetheless, a substantial number of children in the United States—especially those growing up in urban areas—are exposed to high levels of youth violence. As awareness of the problem of youth violence has increased, so have the calls for effective means of prevention.

This report describes one of the largest and longest running school-based violence prevention programs in the country—the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)—and discusses the results of a rigorous evaluation of its effectiveness conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at Columbia University's Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health. The report is designed to inform policymakers, program developers and managers at the local level, and other opinion leaders and decision makers of an effective strategy for directly addressing the problem of violence among children and youth. The evaluation provides concrete evidence that early school-based violence prevention initiatives such as the RCCP can work and should be included in communities' efforts to prevent violence among children and youth.

Program Overview

The RCCP is a school-based primary prevention program that begins in kindergarten and extends through the 12th grade. The program is designed to promote constructive conflict resolution and positive inter-group relations. In doing so, it reduces early risks for later aggression and violence. The RCCP is based on the philosophy that aggressive and violent behavior is learned and therefore can be reduced through education. It is built around a set of core skills: communicating clearly and listening carefully, expressing feelings and dealing with anger, resolving conflicts, fostering cooperation, appreciating diversity, and countering bias. These skills are learned through a curriculum taught by teachers receiving both initial training and ongoing follow-up and support from RCCP staff developers. The RCCP is also implemented through the training of student-based peer mediation groups and school administrators, and by continued outreach to parents.

One of the nation's largest school-based conflict resolution programs, the RCCP now serves approximately 9,000 students in 60 New York City public schools. Founded in 1985, the RCCP is a collaboration of Educators for Social Responsibility Metropolitan Area (ESR Metro) and the New York City Board of Education, Division of Student Support Services. It is also being replicated in 12 other school systems around the country by the RCCP National Center, an initiative of the national ESR.

RCCP aims to transform the cultures of classrooms and schools, thereby providing children with an environment containing similar opportunities for social-emotional learning as for traditional academic subjects.

Evaluation Overview

The NCCP evaluation of the RCCP was guided by the understanding that certain types of social-cognitive processes lead to the development of aggressive behavior and violence. These processes include children's beliefs and fantasies concerning aggression, their attributions about the behavior of others, and their interpersonal problem-solving skills. The evaluation was planned so that it could assess the impact of the RCCP on these social-cognitive processes as well as on the aggressive behavior itself.

The evaluation was designed to ensure that its results would reflect the effectiveness of the RCCP as implemented in New York City public schools. The two-year study included approximately 5,000 second- through sixth-grade children in 15 schools. Both the students and the schools were highly representative of the public education system in New York City.

The Findings

Overall, NCCP's evaluation found that the RCCP had a significant positive impact when teachers taught a high number of lessons from the RCCP curriculum (on average, 25 lessons over the school year). The NCCP researchers compared groups of children on their rate of change in the targeted outcomes over the course of the first year of the evaluation. Independent of their participation in the RCCP, children's aggressive thoughts and behaviors increased over time. However, children receiving a high number of lessons had significantly slower growth in self-reported hostile attributions, aggressive fantasies, and aggressive problem-solving strategies, as well as in teacher-reported aggressive behavior, compared to children receiving a low number of lessons or no lessons at all. Children in the high lessons group also received significantly increased ratings from their teachers on their positive social behaviors and emotional control and showed greater improvement on standardized academic achievement tests compared to the other two groups. Importantly, children receiving a low number of lessons did somewhat more poorly than children receiving no lessons on a number of these outcomes.

Additional results indicate that the RCCP benefits all children regardless of gender, grade, or risk-status, although the evidence suggests slightly reduced benefits for boys, younger children, and children in high-risk classrooms and neighborhoods.

Preliminary analyses testing the effects of the RCCP across both years of the evaluation suggest that each year a student participates in the RCCP has an additive effect on slowing rates of growth of many of the risk factors for aggression and violence. Analyses of program costs indicate that the RCCP can be implemented for approximately $98 per child for the first year of program implementation, which is relatively inexpensive compared to school districts' per-pupil expenditures.

While the report summarizes the implications of these results for violence prevention program implementation and social policy, the most important one is for teacher recruitment, training, and professional development. The NCCP evaluation found that the program has a positive impact only if it is implemented well by motivated teachers.

The results of the NCCP evaluation show that school-based prevention programs like the RCCP have the potential to be an integral component of communities' initiatives to prevent aggression and violence among children and youth. When implemented well, the RCCP is effective at slowing the rate of increase of social-cognitive processes and behaviors that lead to violence. Additionally, these effects are gained at a relatively low cost and are not purchased at the expense of children's academic achievement.

Conclusion

The goal of this report is to provide policymakers and program developers with the results of NCCP's rigorous evaluation of this school-based violence prevention program in order to assist them in making informed decisions about the development and implementation of violence prevention efforts. Youth violence is a growing concern for many Americans. Although approximately two out of three schools now use some form of ongoing violence prevention program, it is important for school decisionmakers to select and implement programs whose effectiveness is supported by rigorous independent evaluations such as the RCCP.

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National Center for Children in Poverty

1989–1999: A Decade of Work for Low-Income Children and Families

National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) was established in 1989 at the School of Public Health, Columbia University, with core support from the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The Center's mission is to identify and promote strategies that reduce the number of young children living in poverty in the United States and that improve the life chances of the millions of children under age six who are growing up poor.

The Center:

- Alerts the public to demographic statistics about child poverty and to the scientific research on the serious impact of poverty on young children, their families, and their communities.
- Designs and conducts field-based studies to identify programs, policies, and practices that work best for young children and their families living in poverty.
- Disseminates information about early childhood care and education, child health, and family and community support to government officials, private organizations, and child advocates, and provides a state and local perspective on relevant national issues.
- Brings together public and private groups to assess the efficacy of current and potential strategies to lower the young child poverty rate and to improve the well-being of young children in poverty, their families, and their communities.
- Challenges policymakers and opinion leaders to help ameliorate the adverse consequences of poverty on young children.

Teaching Conflict Resolution: *An Effective School-Based Approach to Violence Prevention*

by J. Lawrence Aber, Joshua L. Brown, and Christopher C. Henrich

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